



PHOENIX FIELD DIVISION

Background on designer synthetic drugs

Designer synthetic drugs are often marketed as herbal incense, bath salts, jewelry cleaner, or plant food, and have caused significant abuse, addiction, overdoses, and emergency room visits. Those who have abused synthetic drugs have suffered vomiting, anxiety, agitation, irritability, seizures, hallucinations, tachycardia, elevated blood pressure, and loss of consciousness. They have caused significant organ damage as well as overdose deaths.

Smokable herbal blends marketed as being “legal” and providing a marijuana-like high have become increasingly popular, particularly among teens and young adults, because they are easily available and, in many cases, they are more potent and dangerous than marijuana. These products consist of plant material that has been impregnated with dangerous psychoactive compounds that mimic THC, the active ingredient in marijuana. Synthetic cannabinoids are sold at a variety of retail outlets, in head shops and over the Internet. Brands such as “Spice,” “K2,” “Blaze,” and “Red X Dawn” are labeled as incense to mask their intended purpose. In 2012, a report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) reported 11,406 emergency department visits involving a synthetic cannabinoid product during 2010. In a 2013 report, SAMHSA reported the number of emergency department visits in 2011 involving a synthetic cannabinoid product had increased 2.5 times to 28,531. The American Association of Poison Control Centers reported 5,205 calls related to human exposure of synthetic cannabinoids.

For the past several years, there has also been a growing use of, and interest in, synthetic cathinones (stimulants/hallucinogens) sold under the guise of “bath salts” or “plant food.” Marketed under names such as “Ivory Wave,” “Purple Wave,” “Vanilla Sky,” or “Bliss,” these products are comprised of a class of dangerous substances perceived to mimic cocaine, LSD, MDMA, and/or methamphetamine. Users have reported impaired perception, reduced motor control, disorientation, extreme paranoia, and violent episodes. The long-term physical and psychological effects of use are unknown but potentially severe. The American Association of Poison Control Centers reported 2,656 calls related to synthetic cathinone (“bath salts”) exposures in 2012 and overdose deaths have been reported as well.

These products have become increasingly popular, particularly among teens and young adults and those who mistakenly believe they can bypass the drug testing protocols of employers and government agencies to protect public safety.

They are sold at a variety of retail outlets, in head shops, and over the Internet. However, they have not been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for human consumption or for medical use, and there is no oversight of the manufacturing process.

The Drug and Chemical Evaluation Section (ODE) of the DEA Office of Diversion Control continues to gather information on the pharmacology, toxicity, and abuse of synthetic cannabinoids and cathinones and products containing these substances to support possible scheduling of the next generation of these substances.

Controlled Substance Analogue Enforcement Act

While many of the designer drugs being marketed today are not specifically prohibited in the Controlled Substances Act (CSA), the **Controlled Substance Analogue Enforcement Act of 1986 (AEA)** allows many of these drugs to be treated as controlled substances if they are proven to be chemically and/or pharmacologically similar to a Schedule I or Schedule II controlled substance. A number of cases that were part of “Operation Log Jam” and most recent “Project Synergy” will be prosecuted federally under this analogue provision, which is being utilized to combat these new and emerging designer drugs.

DEA has used its emergency scheduling authority to combat both synthetic cathinones (the so-called “bath salts” with names like Ivory Wave, etc.) and synthetic cannabinoids (the so-called incense products like K2, Spice, etc.), temporarily placing several of these dangerous chemicals into Schedule I of the CSA. Congress has also acted, permanently placing 26 substances into Schedule I of the CSA in 2012.

More information about synthetic designer drugs can be found on the [Drug Fact Sheets](http://www.dea.gov) at www.dea.gov.